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ABSTRACT

This paper describes effective practices for developing Individual Education Plans in small rural schools along the U.S.-Mexican border. Since immigration levels in this area are high and many immigrants are limited-speakers or nonspeakers of English, border school districts are concerned about issues involving communication with parents and students. The basis of the IEP is obtaining the informed consent of parents; informed consent means reaching understanding despite differing education levels, cultures, and languages. Principals and administrators working in border school districts have identified the following as effective practices for IEP meetings: (1) obtain background information on the student as soon as possible; (2) establish a positive environment with parents during the meeting; (3) determine the language of comprehension and use this language; (4) preface the meeting with a brief summary of the student's background and define the purpose of the meeting; (5) keep the level of communication simple and understandable; (6) serve as an advocate of the student; (7) include pauses during the meeting to monitor parental comprehension; (8) summarize the points agreed upon in the IEP; (9) allow parents to sign the IEP documents first to reflect the significance of parent participation in the process; and (10) involve the parents in developing specific instructional goals and objectives. (LP)

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BUILDING POSITIVE RELATIONSHIPS ON THE BORDER WITH PARENTS OF SPECIAL STUDENTS: EFFECTIVE PRACTICES FOR THE I.E.P.

The border southwest is one of the fastest growing areas in the United States. Much of the growth is directly associated with immigration to the United States of people of Mexico and other Latin American countries. As new border crossings are opened and as the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) is implemented, border growth is anticipated to remain high. Many communities along the United States/Mexico border have been or are becoming predominantly Spanish speaking. The ethnic demographics and the shift in language reflects the increased impact that immigration is having on border states.

Because many of the new immigrants are limited or non-speakers of English, border school districts are experiencing policy/process concerns and issues involving communication with parents and students. Administrators, teachers, and school boards are necessarily addressing certain realities of border change to effectively meet the needs of students and the community (Cooper, Gonzalez, 1993). As the border becomes redefined, other states and schools districts beyond the traditional border corridor will likewise be impacted.

There are issues and concerns effecting education on the border other than differences in language. One such issue is the difference in educational systems. Educational systems in the immigrant's native countries are often different than the American educational system. Laws and recognized rights governing special education in the United States certainly differ from those in other countries. Unfortunately, this leads to greater confusion and disconnection between home and school.

Many new immigrant parents have limited education which exacerbates the situation. Research suggests that parents who are aware, involved, and connected to their children's education have a positive effect upon academic achievement. This also applies to parents and students of special needs. However a "disproportionate number of these individuals ...do not have the skills or knowledge to fully participate" (Banks, 1993).

Intrinsic to successful relationships on the border with parents of special students is the concept of informed consent. Cornerstone to a workable Individual Education Plan (I.E.P.) and in true spirit of the law, informed consent is "understanding" despite education levels, cultural differences, and language. Given difficulties of achieving true informed consent in homogeneous populations, small rural districts are at a greater disadvantage. Proponents of restructuring see the movement as an opportunity to establish school environments that are culturally flexible and empowering. However, an "empowering school culture and social structure will require restructuring of the culture and organization of the schools" (Banks, 1993). Donahoe suggests

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that in order to achieve change in school culture there must be change in school structure (Donahoe, 1993). This implies that schools must go beyond traditional approaches to problem solving because issues arising along the border are rather non-traditional and involve great numbers of parents and students. It also implies that the types of changes necessary to bridge linguistic and cultural differences are significant and structural in nature.

The I.E.P. is used herein synonymously as the committee that decides placement, dismissal, and reviews the student's status. Since the I.E.P. is often the primary contact with parents of special students, it is important to examine successful practices and/or policies effecting the I.E.P. in border schools. Rural schools along the border are fast becoming aware of the changing dynamics of their communities and the subsequent impact on planning and program. Through necessity they have developed creative approaches and other fundamental processes for the I.E.P.

For this study, several border principals and administrators were asked their perceptions of effective practices for the I.E.P. The principals and administrators were from small rural border districts experiencing the impact of immigration and other related issues. The composite information is outlined in the following as effective practices:

1) Procure previous information on the student Getting previous information on special education students can often be weeks, sometimes months in arriving. For students coming from other countries, information may be even more difficult to obtain. Because of differences in educational systems, laws, and communication infrastructures, information may sometimes never be received. It is important that as soon as a student is identified as requiring an I.E.P. schools attempt to obtain official information. During this period, schools can begin developing their own information history by visiting with the parents. Many new immigrants are poor and have limited transportation resources. If parents cannot be reached by phone and cannot arrange to come to the school a personal interview at the student's home may be appropriate and necessary. School personnel can conduct a home visit to meet the student and parents while obtaining valuable preliminary information.

2) Establish a climate of reception The I.E.P. is frequently the initial contact parents may have with the school and faculty. It is important that a positive and caring climate be established. This includes the basic courtesies of hand shaking, smiles, and introductions. First impressions are valuable. The meeting room should seat all participants so that eye contact and communication is maximized. Seating should convey the message that parents are important and are equal participants in decision making. Do not position parents apart from other members of the I.E.P. The chairperson should sit next to or directly across from parents avoiding barriers such as desks. Care should be taken to avoid divisive arrangements. Most administrators are schooled in interviewing techniques which should be applied to the I.E.P.

3) Determine the language of comprehension From the onset of the I.E.P., the meeting should be conducted in the language most comfortable to parents. Because the parents are the key feature of an effective I.E.P. it is logical make every effort to maximize communication while reducing the number of linguistic barriers. Prior to the meeting, the committee chair should

simply ask the parents with which language they would feel most comfortable. Optimally, this information may have already been obtained from the home visit.

Someone on staff must be fluent in the preferred language. This is seldom a problem on the border. However, beyond the traditional border area, staff members with abilities to simultaneously or consecutively translate (accurately) are sometimes difficult to obtain. There are a variety of successful strategies for effective communication with parents of different languages such as translating technology, staff development, and incentive programs (Cooper, Gonzalez, 1993). Staff members are more willing to develop second language skills as "the ability to speak Spanish is no longer seen as a liability rather as a positive strength (Glazer, 1993). For native speakers this comes as a welcome opportunity.

After determining the language to be used during the I.E.P., introductions should be made describing the role of each individual attending the meeting and how the role relates to the student. For example, if the diagnostician is in attendance, a description of what a diagnostician does and how they have been involved with the student would be both informative and appropriate. Often committees, accustomed to frequent I.E.P.s take for granted various roles and protocol of the I.E.P. Parents new to the American educational system may not understand the roles of various individuals included in the typical I.E.P.

4) Preface the I.E.P. with a brief summary of student background and define the purpose of the meeting Because the I.E.P. serves as the decision making meeting for the student's assessment, placement, dismissal, etc., it is important the purpose of the meeting be clearly defined at the beginning. Not all parents fully understand the purpose of the I.E.P. Such efforts serve as both courtesy and effective communication.

5) Keep the level of communication simple and understandable Sustain a dialog with the underlying assumption that in most cases parents are not familiar with specialized diagnostic and educational terminology. If many experienced regular classroom teachers have difficulty defining visual acuity and memory retrieval, it is ridiculous to believe that new immigrant parents, from a different and often limited educational background, are going to do any better. Effective communication does not only involve translation from one language to another, but also using terms that all can understand.

6) Serve as an advocate for the student Each I.E.P. should be conducted to insure that decisions are made in the best interest of that particular student. Although decisions are colored by differing perspectives (e.g., administrator, teacher, parent), serving as an advocate for the student will help reduce the biases inherent in collaborative decision making.

7) Include pauses during the I.E.P. to check the "pulse" of parental comprehension Throughout the I.E.P., timely pauses should be included to help clarify concepts and provide the opportunity for parents to respond and interact. Parents do not attend I.E.P.s to remain passive observers. It is the role of the educators to foster active parental participation within this setting. Decisions are made during the I.E.P. effecting their child. Every opportunity should be made for parents to contribute and participate in the care and education their children receive.

Additionally, parents should be viewed as an integral, contributing authority on the child. The parents information, perhaps not technical in form, is no less valuable than the diagnostician's information. Ask parents about their perception of their children's progress, the frequency of contact with the teacher, and their thoughts and feelings about the information voiced during the I.E.P.

8) Summarize the points agreed upon in the I.E.P. In a typical I.E.P. many aspects of the student's education and development are discussed. All points finally agreed upon should be summarized toward the conclusion of the I.E.P. These points may include hours of speech, physical therapy, dates of the next re-evaluation, etc. It is also productive to stress the value of the meeting helping to insure positive attitudes and involvement in future meetings.

9) Observe the nuances and protocol while signing off on the I.E.P. documents After points are summarized, parents should be first to sign the documents. This subtle gesture reflects the primary significance parent participation has in the I.E.P. It also communicates the message of the parents ultimate authority for the child's educational experience. However, before the parents sign documents, the committee chair should describe each portion of the documents so that parents are fully aware of what they are signing. The last to sign should be the administrator. The administrator should review documents making sure that all education, technical, and legal details are covered. The administrator's signature demonstrates that all details have been reviewed and are appropriate.

10) Involve the parents in developing specific instructional goals and objectives After the I.E.P., the primary special education teacher, with the parents, should strive to develop specific instructional goals and objectives for the student. Additionally, teachers may send regular newsletters home to parents describing planned weekly events and activities. Newsletters are most effective if they are written in the language parents understand. Again, having someone on staff with accurate translating skills can benefit.

Few but those actually working in districts along the United States/Mexico border can truly appreciate the growth and impact that immigration is having on the border southwest. Small, rural school districts are facing the immediate thrust of growth including communication and cultural issues. These issues will soon be experienced by districts beyond the traditional border corridor. Districts will benefit by examining effective practices for the I.E.P. as they strive to build positive relationships with parents. As described in this article, some of the ideas and practices are equally applicable and effective in homogeneous environments. However, it is important to consider that in either realm, effective practices are most successful by the fine orchestration of all of the points. Throughout the process of developing positive relationships and effective I.E.P.s must be a genuine interest in the student, regardless of the language spoken or cultural difference. School districts must be prepared to make the necessary changes in practice and policy to best effect positive relationships on the border with parents of special needs.

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